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ABSTRACT

During the 1950s, when it first began, Readers Theatre was textual in its emphasis; it involved the group reading of literature and the staging of poems and poets' stories, essays, and scenes. In its second stage, during the sixties, Readers Theatre became a directors' art; it was the director who adapted and arranged the literature and whose creativity and insight gave Readers Theatre its continuing growth and energy. The third stage, now in process, is a performer-centered period in which the readers themselves become the artistic impetus for the Readers Theatre presentational form. Interpretation and Readers Theatre have for too long been defined, and their perspectives, horizons, and future have far too long been seen, only in terms of their educational setting. Complete identification with the book leads to a flat interpretation. However, with the interpreter as artistic source and with the extended dimensions of chance composition, the text again exists--presumed, subsumed, and celebrated within and through the presentational form of the readers of Readers Theatre. (LL)

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DID ANYTHING HAPPEN?: CHANCE COMPOSITION IN READERS THEATRE

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DID ANYTHING HAPPEN?:
CHANCE COMPOSITION IN READERS THEATRE

I need to begin by proposing and describing three stages in the history of Readers Theatre. As with any descriptions of historical periods I first acknowledge the overlapping and interweaving of categories, for I do detect a changing pattern in this thing we call Readers Theatre in terms of three stages. Though group readings date back to ancient Greece and Rome and as elocutionary recitals or verse choir presentations were in college curriculums by the turn of the century, and though it did not spring full-grown from the head of Zeus in the decade here stated, the first stage of contemporary Readers Theatre developed extensively on the campus and in the professional theatre throughout the Fifties. The second stage can be seen in the Sixties, and the third stage, that of the Seventies, is a prognosis of our Readers Theatre future. All three stages reflect Readers Theatre in, and in relation to, several movements within the contemporary theatre of these periods.

Readers Theatre and Chamber Theatre began out of several objectives, but central to their origins and popularity was the need for a form that could explore and present the overlooked or unwieldy masterpieces that did not fit into conventional theatrical fare. Thus Don Juan in Hell, Under Milkwood, and many others found presentational form and favor in the professional theatre of the Fifties. In its origins Readers Theatre was textual in its emphasis; it was the group reading of literature, and countless poems and poets stories, essays, and scenes were staged because their literary forms had found presentational form in Readers Theatre.

Readers Theatre was deeply and functionally rooted in an academic soil, and it prospered there because of the educational and cultural use for literature that did not normally gain voice or form in university or

professional theatre. It was a worthy origin for Readers Theatre--educational, cultural and literary.

In its second stage Readers Theatre became a directors' art, for it was the director who adapted and arranged the literature, and it was his creativity and insight that gave Readers Theatre its continuing growth and energy. As the new generation of talented Readers Theatre directors developed during the Sixties, two important texts on Readers Theatre were written. Both the Coger and White[1] and the Maclay[2] books addressed themselves primarily to the Readers Theatre director and his problems and responsibilities in relation to the adaptation and presentation of the literature.

Chamber Theatre, which we can describe as a related form of Readers Theatre, also developed during this second stage of Readers Theatre, and in a similar pattern. Concerned with the problems of staging prose fiction, Chamber Theatre becomes a director-adaptor's milieu because of the special textual demands in staging narrative form.

During this second stage both Readers Theatre and Chamber Theatre trained its leaders, the directors and adaptors who proseletized the form on even more college campuses, and who frequently reached into both secondary schools and the professional and community theatres.

Interestingly, when the professional theatre borrowed the Readers Theatre form (especially as this form was developing muscle on the college campuses during the second stage) it often reverted to the more traditional staging forms of the first stage--Brecht on Brecht or An Evening's Frost in the Sixties.

Simultaneous with the professional theatre's finding and using this presentational form for much delightful literature (and usually staging it in a rather traditional way), Readers Theatre directors on the college campuses

were grappling with the heady problems of epic form, alienation, locus and focus, and all the hocus-pocus of this new form. Our bibliographies, our prophets, our scholars, and our first texts appeared; we were creating our first leaders in the Sixties.

The third stage is the most enticing and the most puzzling, for it is the one that is yet to be. We must search through our needs and accomplishments in Readers Theatre before we can begin to describe the direction of the Seventies. It is my thesis that we have developed through the literature-centered and director-centered stages in Readers Theatre and that we now stand at the edge of a performer-centered period in which the readers themselves become the artistic impetus for the Readers Theatre presentational form.

Previously Drs. Coger and White spoke of a "threefold service" of Readers Theatre: "for the reader, for the audience, and for the literature itself."[3] But this service for the reader (and also for the audience) was in terms of "personal development" and "cultural enrichment"; creativity was in terms of textual research and learning. In Maclay's Readers Theatre: Toward a Grammar of Practice chapter six, entitled "Performing," concludes with the provocative and unexplored idea that "the performer in Readers Theatre is in an active rather than a passive relationship to the text."[4] It is this active relationship that I should like to pursue and explore, with hypotheses (and hopes) drawn from the composer John Cage, and his explorations in chance or indeterminacy in compositions, and the theatrical happenings of the mid-Sixties. My subject is an exploration of form, the active structuring of the presentational form of Readers Theatre by the readers.

The Aristotelian concept of form is a progression through time and space which is effected or altered by a change, that, in turn, alters a

linear progression. There is, or was, a causal relationship. But the twentieth century perceives form as a field or galaxy of possible elements. Change becomes a chance occurrence within the field or galaxy, and this "chance-y" change creates its own vital rhythm and form. As John Cage said, "The truth is that everything causes/ everything else. We do not speak therefore/ of one thing causing another."[5]

Cage has been greatly influenced by the Chinese I Ching, the Book of Changes, and he is chiefly responsible for the use of chance and indeterminacy in composition. With Indeterminacy, the performers (whether in dance, music, or theatre) are free to choose alternative material provided by the choreographer, composer, or director. They are given only the particles that are potential to the field or galaxy of their artistic action. The form of the composition is a product of the performers. Thus events happen, and they are effected and shaped by the elements that are both present and absent. Previously the function of the Readers Theatre director was to shape and control the elements he chose as essential to the form of the work. All of us who have directed know how idealistic we were to believe we had much control over the elements of our presentations--the performers, their actions and sounds, all those technical-mechanical things, even the literature itself eluded our determination to capture its form. For in fact, chance and change have always been an integral aspect of presentational forms.

The Happenings of the Sixties, though they puzzled and maddened us sometimes, forced both directors and audiences to relax some of their "hang-ups" and to explore the potentials of unpredictability. Not incidentally it created a whole generation of performers who were spontaneous, released, and responsive--tribal in every sense. The demanding commitments

of Living Theatre, Grotowski's and Marowitz's companies, even the pop version of the Hair tribe, reflect the organic, on-going direction of chance composition and a performer-centered movement in the contemporary theatre of the Sixties and early Seventies. In the Happenings, alternative material, actions, and sequences were established by the performer with or without a leader (and this leader was often an author-director-performer-member). Selection involved exclusion as well as inclusion. Happenings ranged from completely open to partially controlled in terms of predictability. Essential to all, though, was the function of the performer as an artistic source in informing the form of the Happening.

In interpretation we speak of our students as experiencing the literature. As teachers we hopefully guide our students in the experience of the literature, and then as Readers Theatre directors we ask them to serve as aspects of our own singular expression of the literature's form. We believe that the student learns and benefits from his relationship to our vision and controls, but we have overlooked (or avoided) for too long the elements and forms created by the performers' experience. As John Cage said, "We must get ourselves into a situation where we can use our experience no matter what it is."[6]

Many of you have already made attempts with this idea of the performer as artistic source, when you asked your students for suggestions and materials for your own productions, or when students were given an opportunity to adapt or direct a presentation. But, and myself included, we all probably balk at the idea of complete release to chance or indeterminacy. In part this is because we see our students as "inexperienced." But the student does, and will, gain the experience of the literature through interpretation, and then, again, "We must get ourselves into a situation where we can

use our experience no matter what it is."

How does one "use one's experience," as a Readers Theatre teacher and director, and as a Readers Theatre performer? Perhaps in a collage of poetry--an evocation of voices and phrases, stanzas and poems from the literature studied (and experienced) in one of your classes. Forget about a program and programming. Tell them to close their eyes and hear and speak what's in them. Are you studying Shakespeare? Let it happen--like the Marowitz presentation of Hamlet where lines and scenes of the play were performed simultaneously, in random sequence, with characters in different scenes acting together, because Marowitz began with the observation that everybody knew the story already and so there was no need to repeat a predictable linear pattern. Each performance of his Hamlet was a discovery for actors and audience of the several parts and the whole play, simply without the already-known sequence of events. Or, if you wish, let your readers retain the sequential form of the literature, but they can vary the selection or the volume with which they perform it. Simultaneous delivery of disparate selections, with or without volume variations; the juxtapositioning of several selections--read in whole, or in phrases, fragments, or sections, a "discussion" on a general topic with each performer speaking an author, work, or character he has studied and absorbed. Vladimir and Estragon meet Oedipus in the Forest of Arden. The variations and potentials are many, and unpredictable.

Let us consider the Readers Theatre performer, not the mind and not the text, as the shaping element of our form. The artistic impulse is within the performer; the text is what he shapes himself with; and the mind is only where others experience his art.

Just as Stanislavsky and Grotowski re-emphasized the performer in the theatre, interpretation in the Seventies should look to our own performers as artists, as flexible, sensitive, disciplined, and enthused performers of literature. Any art form presupposes certain disciplines and training, and with his experience in literature and performance, and like a twentieth

century rhapsode, the Readers Theatre performer could speak his art, returning to literature its oral, spontaneous basis, and maybe, even for those gifted ones, earn a livelihood doing it. Perhaps this is almost impossible, but the interpreters of today are, after all, the first "minstrels" with college degrees. Readers Theatre is the ensemble experience for the performer, improvising and refining new and old literary forms and presentational forms like the commedia dell'arte players of Italy.

Interpretation and Readers Theatre have for too long defined themselves only in terms of their educational setting, and their perspectives, horizons, and future are seen only there. We were a library of literature, preserving the text and all that. But too often this has become self-preservation. Our identification with the book becomes so complete that we see ourselves as just that: pale, thin, and on the shelf. But with the interpreter as artistic source and the extended dimensions of chance composition, the text again exists--presumed, subsumed, and celebrated within and through the presentational form of the readers of Readers Theatre. This is beginning to sound like a manifesto for Readers Theatre, but I do find it intriguing to think of a rhapsodic or bardic revival in Readers Theatre. Social scientists promise us increased leisure, and I would only ask that Readers Theatre and its performers may provide us with some pleasures in that leisure. (You might consider these ideas as "The Greening of Readers Theatre.") In order to find out if anything might happen, we must give chance, change, and the interpreters a chance. As teachers it has always been our impossible task to teach--to stimulate, fill, tease, and enrich our students. Perhaps we may begin to ask and see: did anything happen? If we have not or will not implement a generation of interpreters who are artists--primary or

secondary, as you will, then we have failed as teachers of this art. You have only your predictability to lose. Make it a theatre of the readers: nurture them, they are our future.

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Footnotes:

1. Leslie Irene Coger and Melvin R. White, Readers Theatre Handbook (Glenview, Illinois, 1967).
2. Joanna Hawkins Maclay, Readers Theatre: Toward a Grammar of Practice (New York, 1971).
3. Op. cit., p. 7.
4. Op. cit., p. 70.
5. A Year From Monday (Middletown, Conn., 1967), p. 17.
6. Interview in Richard Kostelanetz, The Theatre of Mixed Means (New York, (1968), p. 50, 58.